

Accidental abuse rather than deliberate misuse?  
The teaching of history in a changing Scotland

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Recent years have seen an unprecedented public interest in Scotland in the relationship between national identity and the teaching of history. The context for that interest is the cultural and political renaissance in Scotland which has developed over the last two decades. That renaissance has taken many forms of which only a few can be noted here. These include a much more confident expression of Scottish national identity in the public media and a greatly increased interest in aspects of Scottish culture such as Scottish literature, history and the arts. Gaelic language broadcasting and publishing have also experienced two decades of growth. Surveys into the question of national identity have indicated that the majority of young and middle aged Scots are now much less likely to define themselves as British. "Britishness" increasingly seems to be a concept with which only Scots in older age brackets feel comfortable. These long-term social and cultural changes were expressed politically in 1997 in two significant ways. In the United Kingdom General Election in May the Conservative party, which was opposed to any form of change to Scotland's constitutional position in the United Kingdom, lost all its Parliamentary seats in Scotland. In September the Scottish people voted by almost 3 to 1 in a referendum for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament for the first time since 1707. Elections to that Parliament will take place in 1999 and the Parliament, with powers over a wide range of Scottish domestic issues, will open in Edinburgh in the year 2000. Current opinion polls indicate that the Scottish National Party, which seeks full independence for Scotland from the United Kingdom, might emerge as the largest party in the new Parliament, and that a majority of Scots now believe that Scotland will be fully independent within fifteen years.<sup>1</sup> While that may be speculation, most public commentators agree that the Scots have embarked upon a new chapter in the process of national development and that this is a process which involves the rediscovery and reinterpretation of their national identity, history and heritage. Not surprisingly, issues to do with history of Scotland and the teaching of Scottish history, have acquired a sharper political edge in recent years. Therefore it is pertinent to ask : What has been the role of history teachers and the history syllabus in Scotland in these developments? Have they contributed to this renewed feeling of national sentiment and if so, in what way have they done so?

At the higher level of the universities, Scottish history has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent decades. Twenty years ago the subject was in the doldrums with small departments which seemed rooted in traditional and conservative approaches. Scottish history was avoided by many undergraduates who perceived it to be parochial and insular. Today by contrast, the subject is thriving, has been reinvigorated thanks to a historiographical revolution, and is an exciting area for young research historians. Academic historians have played a part in the process of changing public attitudes towards Scottish identity. However the teaching of Scottish history at tertiary level to the still relatively small numbers of undergraduates is not

concern here. Rather the focus is upon school history which arguably has a greater impact upon larger numbers of young Scots.

When the Scottish National Party first emerged as a mass political party in the 1960s, fears were expressed in some quarters that nationalists might infiltrate the schools to use the classroom for their own political ends. So does the renewed national consciousness in Scotland in the 1990s in any way result from a nationalistic misuse of Scottish history by history teachers?

If this were the case, one would expect an emphasis, or an over-emphasis, upon Scottish history to feature in our syllabi. In fact the reverse is the case. Almost all commentators from all political quarters agree that Scottish history is a neglected subject in our school curriculum.

In the seven years of primary school, a Scottish child may do very little history of any kind for History does not exist as a separate subject there. It is just one part of the broad curricular known as Environmental Studies which also includes topic material drawn from Geography, Politics, Civics, Economics, the physical sciences, technology, Home Economics and Information Technology. In the busy primary classroom, history has to compete for time and attention. A recent framework of good practice in Environmental Studies published by the SCCC, a government-funded body which advises on the curriculum, suggested that the following historical experience constituted 'good practice'. In Primary 1, 2 & 3, pupils would learn about Time, Myself and My Family and do a Local Study. In P4, 5 & 6 pupils might do projects on historical topics such as the Romans in Scotland and the medieval Wars of Independence. In P7 pupils might progress to later topics such as Scotland in the Age of the Jacobite Rebellions. There is no set syllabus. Primary teachers are encouraged to do history with their pupils but time is very tight and there is much greater pressure nowadays for pupils to concentrate upon the sciences and information technology. The reality is that most Scottish pupils learn little about their national past at primary school. What they do learn often takes form of unconnected period patch projects into topics which are relatively well resourced or topics with which the primary teacher feels comfortable, or for which there may be local significance and evidence.

All pupils study history in the first two years of secondary school and typically they spend two classroom hours per week on the subject. Some Scottish history topics are covered in many schools eg : The Early People of Skara Brae, The Vikings in Scotland, the Wars of Scottish Independence, life in a medieval burgh, the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745, life in Scotland during World War Two. However few schools do all of these topics or as much Scottish history as this in their Secondary 1 and 2 programme. Typically pupils in S 1 or 2 would spend around six to eight classroom hours on a topic of this kind.

Only approximately one third of our children choose to continue studying history after S2.

Two thirds cease studying history at the age of 14. In S3 and 4 those who continue mainly look at topics of global significance such as industrialisation, urbanisation and international conflict. One third of the examination syllabus is given over to a compulsory modern history unit entitled Changing Life in Scotland and Britain between 1750 and 1980. It is possible to teach this unit using Scottish or British exemplifications or both. There is therefore some opportunity to study the impact of

these phenomena upon Scotland but essentially by S3 Scottish children have now left Scottish history behind. Instead they are fully blooded in the British fixation with German history and the two World Wars of 14-18 and 39-45. History is studied by a mere 8% of pupils at the Higher Grade in S5.<sup>2</sup> There are opportunities for teachers to select Scottish options at Higher but these are studied in an extremely small number of schools. The most popular options at this stage are twentieth century world topics such as Appeasement or the Cold War. Tiny numbers of pupils study history in S6. Extremely few pursue the available Scottish history topic alternatives.

Why is so little Scottish history studied by Scottish children? Within broad guidelines, teachers in Scotland have considerable freedom to construct their own history curriculum, especially with the 5-14 age group. Why then do most history teachers in Scotland teach so little of their own history? One informed commentator has attributed this phenomenon to the fact that most history teachers in our schools have little knowledge of the subject themselves and less confidence in their ability to teach it. This may be due to the fact that most history teachers in Scotland are now middle-aged and graduated from Scottish universities before the explosion of interest and the development of new perspectives in Scottish history in the 1980s. Others have blamed the lack of suitable resources. There is some evidence that many history teachers in Scotland feel that an emphasis upon Scottish history would leave them open to the charge of parochialism and 'narrow' nationalism.

Nor is there any evidence to suggest that history teachers who support the cause of Scottish nationalism teach more Scottish history, though accurate research in this area has not been undertaken and would be very difficult to pursue. *Prima facie*, the Scottish National Party would seem to have most to gain from the 'scotticisation' of the school history syllabus. However in February 1997 the SNP was dismissive of proposals by the then Conservative Government for separate national examinations in Scottish history. In May 1997 SNP education officials opposed any moves to make Scottish history compulsory and voiced their opinion that an approach to Scottish history which was nationalistic or ethnocentric was extremely undesirable. The multicultural nature of Scottish society needed to be respected and any increased emphasis upon Scottish history was not a priority for them.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that the amount or the type of Scottish history taught in our schools is unduly affected by the political leanings of history teachers or by the political composition of local councils responsible for schools.

Rather than an overt conspiracy to misuse Scottish history for nationalistic or other ends, the reality is that the majority of Scots receive little historical education of any kind during their years of formal schooling. Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools [HMI] have recently asserted that much good practice in Scottish history already exists in Scottish secondary schools but have admitted that often little reference is made to the general historical significance of the events and periods studied.<sup>4</sup> Many history teachers believe that an overcrowded curriculum and a "context-free, disembodied study of themes, skills or empathy" "have left many young Scots knowing very little about their culture and history."<sup>5</sup> Two recent studies have borne this out. One study looked at the general historical knowledge of trainee primary teachers. The other studied the historical understanding of over 3,000 16 year old Scots. The researchers found wide spread ignorance in both groups of key periods, figures and events in Scottish History. Thus over 90% of pupils could not provide an explanation for the importance of key dates in Scottish History such as 1320 and 1603. Many

pupils made erroneous assumptions about events in the past. Thus 37% wrongly believed that Scotland was part of the United Kingdom “because English forces conquered it” and only 24% knew that the Scottish Parliament voted for Union with England in 1707.<sup>6</sup> Rather than deliberate misuse of history, we have created a situation where our history has been largely neglected and where many of our citizens have a very vague understanding of their past and its significance. The possible political consequences of this degree of neglect are clear. Reflecting upon the new constitutional direction which Scotland has embarked upon, one newspaper lamented that “many [young Scots] are likely to vote to end the Union [with England], yet they no idea of how it came about nearly three hundred years ago”.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between Scotland and its larger neighbour to the south is a particularly complex one, both politically and historically. In all fields of human activity, the two nations of Scotland and England have influenced each other for both good and ill, both before and after the Union of 1707. The ways in which these historical influences are portrayed at school level in syllabi and in history textbooks are clearly significant. The English National Curriculum for History prescribes a study at Key Stage 3 entitled *The Making of the Kingdom*. This provides a formal opportunity for children in English schools to learn about and examine the process by which the United Kingdom was formed. English textbooks for this topic consider the differing aims of the participants to the Union and analyse the advantages and disadvantages which the Union brought to them. By contrast very few children in Scotland study this topic yet it is arguably the defining event in Scottish history.

It is instructive for a Scot to look at the portrayal of the English in our school history. A survey of school history textbooks currently used in Scottish schools prompts the following observations. Textbooks which deal with the process of nation building in Scotland between 400 and 1 100 AD mention an English people the Angles of Northumbria who settled in much of southern and eastern Scotland between 550 and 700 AD. Much greater emphasis in textbooks, and in much classroom practice, however is usually given to the Hibernian Scots and Norse contribution to our national development. It is somehow more acceptable to remember our links with Scandinavia and Ireland than with England. The English tend to make no further appearance in Scottish textbooks until the period of the Wars of Scottish Independence between 1286 and 1329. The complex question of English claims to feudal overlordship of the Scottish crown are seldom treated in any depth and in some books are barely mentioned. The attempts by English monarchs to assert their claimed rights over Scotland thus comes to resemble unprovoked assault. The English next appear, for that minority of Scottish pupils who do this topic, in the form of those elements at the Elizabethan Court who argued for and arranged the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Other examples of hostile English behaviour such as the Rough Wooing of Scotland by Henry VIII in the 1540s and the Cromwellian occupation of Scotland in 1650 have dropped out of the syllabus due to lack of time and changes in syllabus style. But many Scottish children will encounter 'Butcher' Cumberland and his redcoats hunting down Jacobite fugitives after 1746 and, despite much teaching to the contrary, many of them will still believe that the Battle of Culloden was fought between armies that were wholly English and Scottish. One of the few constructive influences with which the English are credited is the development of improved farming practices adopted by progressive landowners in Scotland after 1700.

Scottish history textbooks are not deliberately chauvinistic. They often stress at great length the political, cultural and economic links which Scotland had with other states and emphasise the foreign influences from which Scotland benefited. But they seem more comfortable relating Scotland's links with Ireland and Continental Europe particularly Scandinavia and the Low Countries, rather than those with her immediate neighbour. [To some extent, this may reflect the modern perception which many Scots have as being more comfortable in their identity as Europeans than are the English.]

How things are taught is obviously as important as what is taught. Most learning and teaching in history in Scotland is concerned with outcomes such as promoting knowledge and understanding and developing the pupils' skills in thinking and investigating. Most history departments place a stress upon the evaluation of primary and secondary sources so that pupils are encouraged to appreciate historical problems and to detect bias etc. History teaching in Scotland has shared fully in the methodological revolution of recent decades. Curiously however, two Scottish history topics which are commonly taught have largely resisted change in their treatment. The saga of Wallace and Bruce during the medieval Wars of Scottish Independence and the tale of the Jacobite rebellion in 1745 are almost always taught by traditional chronological narration, blow by blow, through the key events. Often this is done with relatively little reflective analysis. Teachers who are wedded to this approach claim the nature of the topic does not lend itself to a discursive treatment in the limited time available. It is a long and complicated tale to tell. In their defence it is true that most textbooks covering this period stick closely to telling the tale in its classic form. Teachers will also argue that evaluative, analytical approaches feature elsewhere in their syllabus and that there is a need for children to study some traditional narrative history at some point in their schooling. But it is interesting that teachers by and large have not rethought this topic and adapted it in a way which promotes investigative and evaluative skills, as has happened with the rest of their syllabus. Is it too far fetched to suggest that these two topics, which are about conflict between an essentially Scottish cause and a force based in Southern Britain, represent an irreducible core of nationalist sentiment in our history syllabus. The number of schools covering the topic of the Wars of Scottish Independence has risen since the release of the film *Braveheart*. Numerous teachers have said to me that they use *Braveheart*, a work full of anachronism, errors and anti-English xenophobia, to raise pupil interest in the period. Some have explained how they encourage their pupils to criticise the film and to appreciate its limitations as history. Others have simply said that they welcome the film because there was nothing very visual to show pupils before it came on the scene.

Concern in Scotland about our children's knowledge and understanding of their history is not new. Nor is public concern about the place of Scottish history and other aspects of national identity such as Scottish literature and traditions within the school curriculum. The letter pages of Scotland's national daily newspapers have long carried correspondence from readers complaining about the lack of attention paid to Scottish history and Scottish culture in our schools. Now however, in the current political climate, these issues are more likely to be discussed in the main editorial and to appear as main features. In recent years, politicians and policy makers in education have had to pay much greater attention to demands for a more 'tartan' curriculum than was the case previously. Some attention has therefore now been given to remedying what has come to be known as "the Scottish historical deficit". The state of teaching and learning about Scottish history in schools has recently been reviewed by a government

funded committee of experts. The SCCC has also recently commissioned a review into the place of Scottish culture in the curriculum. Recommendations as to what constitutes good practice in teaching Scottish history have been distributed to schools and teachers for discussion. Those responsible for drawing up the new Higher curriculum for S5 and S6 which comes into effect in 1999 have taken care to ensure that adequate opportunities exist for pupils to study Scottish history, and that these are intelligently resourced. It is clear that these initiatives will result in an increased emphasis upon national history in Scottish schools in coming years.

Curricular change in Scotland proceeds by consensus and the teaching profession has an important voice in determining the nature of that change. It will therefore largely be for teachers to ensure that our children experience a more coherent, systematic and reflective approach to Scottish history. Whilst encouraging greater interest in our national history, we also have to ensure that the study of Scottish history continues to be rooted in the wider contexts of European and global history, is an activity which promotes critical thinking in the learner, and helps children to understand the historical influences and mutual benefits which have resulted from contact with all our neighbours. The political situation in Scotland after 2000, where the new Parliament in Edinburgh has full responsibility for education, will ensure that the history taught in our schools remains under future public scrutiny. It is possible that history, more than other areas of the school curriculum, will be subject to pressures which are 'political' in the wider sense of the term. Should that be the case, there will be a need for more diverse forms of staff development which encourage history teachers to think more deeply about the purposes of their vocation and the reasons for their subject's inclusion in the curriculum.

## References

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## Summary

The cultural and political renaissance in Scotland increases the public interest in the relationship between national identity and the teaching of history. R. Dargie searches answers to two questions:

1. what has been the role of history teachers and the history syllabus in Scotland in these developments;
2. have they contributed to this renewed feeling of national sentiment and if so, in what way have they done so?

**Key-words:** national identity, history teachers, history syllabus, Scottish history.